

Corruption

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The term “jeremiad” describes a doom laden diatribe against a corrupt society, associated with the Biblical prophet Jeremiah. This is going to be an example of a jeremiad.

Now Jeremiah certainly knew that at the time he lived, two thousand six hundred years ago, there were far more corrupt nations around than his own little kingdom of Judea. He was no admirer of Babylon, and he was no supporter of Egypt, the two “world powers” of his time. But it hurt him that his own people were betraying their own values and behaving no better than anyone else. He suffered imprisonment for his honesty. He was accused of undermining the morale of his people and, in fact, the term “jeremiad” has come to mean “unnecessarily negative criticism”. For all this, he is one of the most admired and respected of our great men. And it is an essential feature of our tradition, both Biblical and post-Biblical, that we make no secret of our failures. Indeed, we focus attention on them to try to learn from our errors.

It is often said, with justification, that Jews who live outside Israel, who have not had to serve in the defense of the land or suffer their children being conscripted, have no right to pass judgment on what happens in Israel. But although those in Israel certainly have a far greater moral authority, this does not mean we Diaspora Jews cannot raise our voices in protest against things we believe are wrong. But wherever we are, we Jews glory in Israel’s triumphs and suffer obloquy for its failures. Therefore we are bound up in her fate, and our future is very much affected, both positively and negatively, by hers. Although there is a clear and obvious distinction between being Israeli and being Jewish, and the two do not always coincide, for the vast majority of Jews Israel is an integral part of our religious lives, let alone the political.

On November 2nd the Jerusalem Post said in an editorial that “corruption is so endemic in the upper echelons of Israeli society that it has virtually become a banana republic.” It also said incidentally in the same edition that one in five Israeli women claim to have been sexually assaulted.

For months now I have rallied to the defense of Israel against the prejudiced, biased, exaggerated, dishonest criticisms that single Israel out as a wicked state while totally ignoring all the far worse corrupt, murderous, and evil regimes around the world. The UN has not set up one, not one, committee to consider compensating any, any victims of political conflict anywhere in the world except Israel. Jimmy Carter can find no other regime to excoriate—not Sudan, not Burma, not North Korea, just Israel. It cannot be explained in any other way than “the oldest hatred”. Nevertheless, I happen to agree that a lot of what happens under occupation is unacceptable and not enough is being done to root out abuse. We must not let this deflect us, any more than Jeremiah did, from criticizing corruption and decadence if

we see it in our own home.

From its inception, Nineteenth Century political Zionism included a sizeable proportion of radicals who consciously turned their backs on religion. There was in Israel a famous Canaanite Movement that wanted to return to a pre-Israelite civilization. Civilization? Burning your children in offering to Moloch and temple prostitution? A. D. Gordon's famous comment about normality being achieved when there would be Jewish prostitutes on the streets of Tel Aviv has long since come (and gone, as Israeli Mafia white slave trade replaced them). Israel is a state that has more than its fair share of crime bosses, corrupt politicians, gang murders, and rapes. You cannot read the daily papers without a sad litany of crimes and corruption, only a small part of which ever reach international news. Recent papers released on the Sinai campaign in 1967 reveal that even if most soldiers were of a higher moral order, there were enough who stole, looted, shot prisoners, and raped to besmirch our reputation as a godly nation (and doubtless put us on the same level as the USA and Britain).

Recent sex scandals from the President down to Ministers and Generals show that a culture of physical bullying and macho insensitivity runs very deep indeed. You probably recall the joke about Golda Meir being asked what she'd do if she discovered one of her ministers was an adulterer. "I'd put his other eye out," she said (referring, of course, to Moshe Dayan, who was a notorious philanderer). The army has in the past had a reputation for using female soldiers for morale as much as anything else—one of the reasons many of the religious objected to female conscription.

Sadly, when you are brutal with your own, of course you are brutal with others. No, I do not make equivalences here. Enemy combatants are always going to get it when they find themselves on the wrong side. It's called war and Israel is in a state of war. Israeli captives have been brutally tortured and their bodies disfigured far more than anything that has happened to the other side. But, as the memorial for the Kfar Qassem massacres this past week reminds us, terrible errors have been made by the "good guys" too. (To Israel's credit, that and other manifestly wrong decisions have been included in its school history syllabuses.)

We need to acknowledge that, for all its achievements, Israel is a sick society. We cannot pretend it isn't so, although no country can be under permanent assault and threat and hope to be normal.

What depresses me even more is that so much of religious life is just as corrupt, financially, politically and, indeed, sexually. Dayanim and rabbanim have been accused of sexual harassment and rape. Yeshivas fiddle their books and student rolls for larger subsidies. No major rabbi has come out publicly with a ringing call to purge Orthodox society of its abuses and they take any attempt at curbing excess as a direct threat against Torah. Political corruption is so endemic that the religious justify it on the grounds that it's the only way to survive. Last week too the Government itself recognized that religious supervisors of Kashrut were too often corrupted because they were paid by the caterers and purveyors and an independent body needs to be set up to control them. It's not just in Monsey in America that you can find

Orthodox rabbis who abuse supervisory obligations. Religion is misused for financial and political gain and oppression. And modern day leaders are more interested in checking for bugs in lettuce leaves.

Of course there are good works and wonderful people. That is the saving grace. I know of no other society where corruption coexists with so much idealism and clean living. But if we fool ourselves that we are not sick, we will not try to work at the cure. And if we don't, then, like the First Commonwealth and the Second, God will not forbear to see us destroy ourselves. We need to hear more people speaking out from love and commitment against those who, through their selfishness and misguidedness, would drag us all down to a lower level. I know a prophet is not heard in his own land but someone has to stand up and speak out against all this, otherwise one will begin to wonder what it is exactly that one is part of and supporting.

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